



The Divine Left: A Chronicle of the Years 1977–1984

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and possibly 'jejeune') or whether it illustrates in this very concern for the personal the literary-philosophical promise of our lives. 'To take Wallace seriously as a thinker', Baskin writes, 'is to take seriously his fervent, perhaps even sometimes his embarrassing, commitment to the problems of the self' (p. 142). And so, in Baskin's reading, Wallace's fiction illustrates how problems 'customarily cordoned off into self-help' (p. 142) have aspects that can and should be considered philosophically. Taking guidance from the later work of Stanley Cavell, Baskin reads *The Pale King* as a perfectionist text framing the development of the human soul not as a personal or a religious problem but as a standing concern for philosophy. It is to Baskin's great credit that his chapter resists the temptation to sentimentalize or to paraphrase Wallace and to illuminate instead the distinctively philosophical purchase of his work.

In any consideration of Wallace's writing there is a consistent temptation to refer to the writer's biography, to his lifelong struggles with anxiety and depression and to his tragic early death, by suicide, at the age of forty-six. Unfortunately, this biographical temptation can too often combine with the posthumous publication of 'This is Water' and *The Pale King* (arguably the pieces from the Wallace canon most easily mined for moralism or self-help), to foreground the writer's personal struggles as fully inseparable from a proper appreciation of his work. The best essays of this new collection, as exemplified by Horn and Baskin, demonstrate that Wallace's literary achievement can be deeply personal, and deeply philosophical, at one and the same time. At his very best Wallace resists the easy certainty of self-help for the detailed delineation of human struggle in life and in language. Thinking of the writer's legacy in this way, we might say that Wallace's work shows a very distinctive form for philosophical exploration to take, that Wallace's creative legacy doesn't count *as* but that it does count *for* philosophy.

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The Divine Left: A Chronicle of the Years 1977–1984

By Jean Baudrillard, translated by D. L. Sweet

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Lunch with Jean Baudrillard ... he has reason to believe in the dissolution of the political, in its fading away [*évanouissement*] through the hypertrophy of the individual and the metaphorical. But how dangerous this moribund remains!

So runs, in its entirety, the single entry in the journals of Jacques Attali which mentions Baudrillard (entry for 7 October 1983 in J. Attali, *Verbatim I: Chronique des années 1981–1986*, Fayard, 1993). By dint of a presumably felicitous rather than deliberate note of ambiguity, it is unclear whether *moribond* in its nominal form here refers back to the abstract ‘political’ (*le politique*) or to that individual who speaks of its dissolution. Grammar and context just about favour the former; but characterizing as a perpetual (and somewhat dangerous) moribund a man who once deflected enquiries into his personal life and private beliefs with the statement ‘I am the simulacrum of myself’ (L. MacFarquhar, ‘Baudrillard on Tour’, *The New Yorker* 28 November 2005) would, at the time of writing, have evinced considerable acuity on Attali’s part. This is the more so given Baudrillard’s attitude toward French politics of the era, exemplified in the title under review. Indeed, the vision of Baudrillard invited to dine with the court intellectual of François Mitterrand’s Elysée, or, as he was also, with then-Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, will strike any with knowledge of his career trajectory as bizarre and amusing. His books, articles and interviews, in form as well as in content, evidence a relentless but also rather disinterested hostility toward institutions. Rejected by the École Normale Supérieure, and his interpretations of Nietzsche rejected by examiners for the German *agrégation* (Baudrillard, *Fragments*, trans. C. Turner, Routledge, 2004, p. 1), he did not belong to what he rather cheekily, perhaps a touch churlishly, called ‘the seraglio’ (*Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews* ed. M. Gane, Routledge, 1993, p. 25). Of his theoretical writing, he admitted frankly that: ‘there had to be an obsession behind it, but I didn’t think it had very much to do with anything. It was a kind of game’ (*ibid.*, p. 105). As a professor, he was quite evidently contemptuous of the academy, and singularly failed to toe the usual lines either as a writer or a pedagogue; no doubt partly inspired by Nietzsche, his ultimate model and master, he relieved himself of the tedium of referencing in his writing after the late 1970s, and as a teacher, reportedly often took the first sessions of a seminar but afterward, most likely bored with the business, simply failed to turn up (on which see P. O’Mahoney, ‘Interview with Mike Gane: Society, Politics and Academia’, *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 11(1) [2014]). For all of which he might be reviled and envied in equal degree.

Just shy of thirty years after its French publication, Semiotext(e), the imprint which, via its publication of *Simulations* (1983), introduced Baudrillard to much of Anglophone academia and, inadvertently, did more than any subsequent source to promote misunderstanding and ensure vulgar appropriations of his thought (for some confirmation of which see the enlightening article of Semiotext(e) – editor S. Lotringer, ‘Better than Life: My 80s’, *Artforum: The 80s Issue*, March 2003), – has issued a translation of *The Divine Left*. Comprising articles written between 1977 and 1984, it reflects on the coming to power of the Socialist Party in France, and contains some of Baudrillard’s most direct commentary on concrete political matters. Readers of Baudrillard will

recognize in these reflections the working out of themes treated more fully but also more abstractly in the books of this period – one of Baudrillard's most productive, which along with some more minor works saw the publications of *Oublier Foucault* (1977), *À l'ombre des majorités silencieuses* (1978), *De la séduction* (1979) *Simulacres et simulation* (1981) and *Les stratégies fatales* (1983). An English translation is therefore welcome, though it can fairly be said that this work, in part owing to the occasional, responsive and less considered nature of its content – in short, its journalistic origins – might be ranked among Baudrillard's less important.

Despite their being responses to the vicissitudes of French politics, and their occasional character, a set of core theses of broader application, what amounts essentially to a diagnostic analysis of the state of western politics and ideology in the period, can be extracted from the six essays.

The background to these pieces is the ascent of the left in France, in the form of the political gains of the Socialist and Communist Parties. In Baudrillard's view, however, the latter did not actually want power, and in fact took steps to prevent their election, placing insuperable barriers to it by insisting on unachievable criteria as a condition of the party's taking power (pp. 49–50, 54–6; cf. 21–4). The left suffers more from the decline of strong historical and political referents (pp. 38–9, 40, 62; cf. 112), and is possessed of no political energy or strategy (pp. 31, 33, 45, 50, 59, 82); it is reduced to moralistic, bureaucratic management of affairs (pp. 25, 35, 51, 62, 83). The trend is not exclusive to the left, but characteristic of the political sphere as a whole; but, though the right engages for example in management of capital which is a form of simulation, advocating entrepreneurship or investment for entrepreneurship's or investment's sake (pp. 26, 113), it retains something of the energy derived from the savagery of capitalism – that energy which, previously, only the promise of revolution could deliver to the left. A further crucial difference is that the right traditionally understands and accepts essential characteristics of politics and power which the left, to its detriment, denies. The left wishes for forgiveness for taking power (p. 142; cf. 110): they want to be moral in power, and power to be exercised for moral ends (pp. 26, 74, 79–80, 85, 91–3). The truth however is that politics *is* power (and power its own end), and essential to it is its fundamental immorality (pp. 24, 28, 83):

The sphere of politics is unstable as such. The exercise of power is never truly legitimate. (p. 106)

Most important here for Baudrillard is the role of the masses. Far from being a passive, mouldable body waiting to be manipulated, their silence and indifference, against traditional conceptual representation from the Greek *ochlos* to the modern crowd, signifies their power: their indifference signals their unwillingness either to assume the burdens of responsibility or agency, or truly to be

represented. Rather they decline representation, not because it deprives them of autonomy (it does not, in the electoral system) but because they are fully aware that representation, along with political will, is illusory (pp. 51–2, 103–4; cf. 125). Baudrillard often evoked the image of Beau Brummel, confronted by a panorama of country lakes, turning to his footman and asking: ‘Which do I prefer?’ The moral he drew from this vignette was that having to choose was a burden, and a bore. He accordingly read the indifference of the masses, the ‘silent majorities’, as a strategy, which delegated to the political class the burdensome and boring matter of choosing (pp. 35, 52–3, 116). In a similar vein, he approvingly quoted Rivarol on the French Revolution to the effect that the people never wanted a revolution, but only the spectacle of it. In the period under examination however, the left, adherents of the revolutionary doctrines of socialism, are haunted by all the missed revolutions, the loss of revolutionary energy, the missed events, which constitute their history (pp. 78–9, 83, 89; cf. 24, 86–7), condemned by the passing into an era of ‘weak events’ (p. 120–22) to recycling a ‘bygone’, ‘dead’ or ‘defunct’ ideology (pp. 75, 111, 122). Their coming to power has come too late.

The masses nevertheless have decided that it will be the destiny of the left to have its bluff called: Baudrillard reads the people as determined to put the left in power, for the sheer spectacle of it (pp. 47–50, 53, 71, 102, 118). This is the more ironic because the truest revolutionaries, the prophets of paradise, cannot and must not succeed: the fulfilment and complete identity of idea and reality is both frightening and banal (pp. 117, 140). Further, the people at bottom are contemptuous of the moral reservations of politicians concerning the corrupting influence of power: they will tolerate corruption and immorality in politics not only for the spectacle of it, and not at all out of apathy or stupidity, but simply because *it is the rule of the game* (pp. 126–7: ‘They will voluntarily give in to lies, in homage to the minimum of intelligence it takes to lie, but they won’t pardon the affectation of truth, because they’re conscious of the basic stupidity it presumes on the part of those who believe in it’).

So indeed there surface within these essays hints of what is the central conviction of Baudrillard’s thought: that systems, and societies, function not according to laws – even or especially their own official laws – but according to rules which depend for their functioning on not being laid bare, on being ‘secret’ insofar as they are unspoken, and upon the complicity of those who observe them. This secret, unofficial level of discourse which both grounds and transcends explicit law is what Baudrillard called symbolic exchange, which appears here as Bataille’s ‘accursed share’ (pp. 95, 125), with which Baudrillard makes symbolic exchange synonymous (elsewhere it is called seduction or the principle of evil: see p. 92). This aristocratic observation of the unspoken rule is in essence opposed to democratic observation of the law, and the seduction and efficacy of the former renders the latter supplementary to and dependent upon it; even the masses prefer the aristocratic forms to the

democratic, and prefer to believe that those in power are no different (they cannot otherwise take power seriously).

This rule of the game, this fundamental immorality, must remain hidden – it is part of this accursed share that no social reason will ever be able to tap ... What resists the social is the fact that each one of us carries within the phantasm of a secret society, of which the least little privilege becomes an initiatory sign. Privilege, literally, is to have one's own law, one's own rule, and one's sovereignty. It's almost the same thing, etymologically, as autonomy, except that the latter has surreptitiously acquired the sense of voluntarily lining up under the law. The people are not fooled. They have no profound desire for autonomy, but for privilege ... it's the political class that is most perverse in its pretentious and melancholic morality. Essentially, the course of things remains happily immoral and politically indifferent. Silence and servitude? Not at all! Those who stay quiet are well-versed in the order, or ironic disorder, of things. Only the political class is caught in this unhappy paradox ... Others live in a happy paradox: for this secret ruse, this ironic and silent complicity, constitutes the true organic quality of the social bind while at the same time (and this is the miracle) making a colossal mockery of it. (pp. 95–7)

Misunderstanding, misjudging, here, the left with its apparently sincere submission to morality renders itself ridiculous:

Now, for there to be a public, there must be secrecy. For there to be a public spirit, and thus a political form, there must be a secrecy of acts, wills, and discourses – not only a secret quality to all that, but a secret sharing, a secret circulation, even a secret rivalry in terms of actions, with a secret complicity concerning the rules of the game ... By ignoring this hidden rule of the game, Socialism is condemning itself to failure, for the appeal to public morality or collective responsibility is a hopeless expedient. (pp. 123–5)

These are perhaps the most resonant passages in the book for anyone familiar with Baudrillard's broader theoretical enquiries, though that is a fact likely difficult for the uninitiated reader to appreciate.

There is an introduction provided by sociologist Jean-Louis Violeau, and translator's notes, but considerably more editorial work might have been done to contextualize aspects of the analysis. It is difficult for Anglophone readers to determine what Baudrillard means in persistent, casual references to 'the social' as a concept with a traceable history, or his comment without further elaboration that the 'humanist and philosophical impulse of the Enlightenment' was 'to socialize society' (p. 114). It is likely that to understand such remarks

one must understand something of the development of sociology in France, from Comte and Durkheim through those affiliated with Roger Callois' Collège de Sociologie (including Jean Wahl, Pierre Klossowski, Georges Bataille and Alexandre Kojève), its closer relationship to anthropology in France than elsewhere, and the prominence there of practitioners of the latter discipline such as Mauss (*Essai sur le don* is one of the most important texts for Baudrillard) and most particularly Lévi-Strauss: the latter situated modern anthropology in relation to one particularly eminent Enlightenment predecessor in a famous address in Geneva in 1962 titled 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Fondateur des Sciences de l'Homme'. (For some analysis of the term's history and entry into customary English usage, see F.A. Hayek "What is 'Social'? What Does it Mean?" in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (London: Routledge, 1967), pp. 237–47, and references in Id., *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 332 n. 22.) Similarly, references to events as effects of cumulative historical processes or as singular ruptures in the same may for many recall Foucault, but that these terms and ideas can so easily be recycled by a French theorist is most likely due to the influence on French intellectual culture of the often magnificent studies by members of the *Annales* School of historians, which treated quite explicitly the problematic of situating singular events in relation to long-term historical trends. (See for example F. Braudel's seminal article 'Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée' *Annales* 13(4) [1958], pp. 725–53; the relationship between 'the event' as rupture considered in the context of *longue durée* history is examined by an eminent second-generation member of the school, E. Le Roy Ladurie, in 'Événement et longue durée dans l'histoire sociale: l'exemple chouan', *Communications* 18 [1972], pp. 72–84.)

There is also more immediate contextualization required. The introduction notes (pp. 15–16) that the volume's title essay was originally a rejoinder to a much-discussed piece by Max Gallo published earlier in 1983, 'Le Silence des Intellectuels' (*Le Monde* 26 July 1983); but nothing is done to identify figures such as Italian politician Enrico Berlinguer, whom Baudrillard quotes, or Gianfranco Sanguinetti, member of Debord's Situationist International and author of the 1975 tract *Rapporto veridico sulle ultima opportunita di salvare il capitalismo in Italia*, published under the pseudonym 'Censor' and purporting to be the work of a wealthy industrialist, but later revealed to be Sanguinetti's hoax.

What, finally, can a reader gain from the book? Its brevity notwithstanding, the level of cynicism on display makes it an occasionally gruelling read. It suggests an attitude of almost terminal cynicism in relation to the political, whether approached via theory or praxis – a world in which doers are dupes, while thinkers or writers who would seek to influence politics are dreaming of a disappearing era when such things were still possible.

It would suit critics of Baudrillard to dismiss the book on this ground as blinkered or unserious; but the reality, unsettling perhaps for some, is that Baudrillard's attitude, and the substance of his analysis, seem – given how

inconsequential the events it records and responds to appear at a remove of only three decades – to be in retrospect quite vindicated. The post-1989 recession of Communism, and the fact that what Daniel Halévy designated as ‘the acceleration of history’ has gathered further momentum, mean that many of the diagnosed and agonized-over problems of the day now savour of the ridiculous. The observation that both left and right seem locked in a simulation of the political designed to disguise the fact (primarily from themselves) that there is little difference between them has long been commonplace: its practical political consequence was Tony Blair’s claim that New Labour in Britain would occupy the seemingly contradictory ‘radical centre’. The contention of their convergence – a process by which politics became simply the ‘post-ideological’, bureaucratic administration of the state – indeed seems borne out by the journey of Gallo, who from 1983–84 was Mitterrand’s government spokesman, but who by 2007 would offer voluble support to Nicolas Sarkozy, praising and promoting him as the heir not only to Gaullism but to Napoleon (see the interview: ‘Sarkozy’s Victory is that of Reality over Utopia’, *Der Spiegel* 16 May 2007). This would be ironic if it were not so commonplace: the path from left to right, dissent to embrace of the conservative political establishment, from yearnings for ‘utopia’ to acceptance of ‘reality’, which is travelled by the aging politico, more conscious of the fragility and vulnerability of his civilization and its institutions, is wholly familiar. Baudrillard would more likely laugh at than lament such realities, as he might at the fact that Gallo, with other controversialists like Alain Finkielkraut, is now propping up that august and always faintly preposterous body, the Académie Française.

In the final analysis, it is difficult, considering the volume in isolation from Baudrillard’s other works, to argue a strong case for its standalone value as a political or philosophical analysis: its primary interest will be in the area of intellectual or social history. It is in some ways, again owing to its journalistic origins, a curio; a literary artefact, chronicling a particular historical moment via highly idiosyncratic reflections – and one senses that its author would neither claim greater dignity nor envisage a grander destiny for it than this.

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